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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Bosnia consular outreach program yields substantial drop in Summer Work and Travel refusal rate and rise in total participants.

¶1. [Summary] In past years, Sarajevo's refusal rate for J1 Summer Work and Travel (SWT) applicants was often over 50 percent. Recognizing that our refusal rate was directly related to a Post policy of only issuing to students of accredited universities, the Consular section launched an outreach program targeting, schools, and recruiters in an attempt to minimize the negative public relations impact of a high student refusal rate. Now that the summer student visa season is coming to a close, we are able to look back at our program to validate whether our outreach efforts were successful. Sarajevo now can report a 92% drop in SWT refusals in ¶2009. In addition, by focusing on recruitment of better candidates, post was able to nearly triple the number of SWT participants from last year. [End Summary]

¶2. Previously, no federal level BiH government agency was charged with accreditation, therefore many students going to newer private universities did not meet the basic requirements for SWT of attending an accredited university. Yet, they were applying for SWT J1 visas anyway. In 2008, the Consular section refused 74 percent of SWT applicants. For a student exchange program that promotes experiencing life in the United States, Post felt that the high number of refusals was negating any positives which might be gained by those traveling to the US on the program. Post embarked upon an outreach program to clarify with the feeder institutions what qualifications were necessary to partake in the program.

¶3. This past winter we educated our applicant pool to the requirements needed to participate in the program and to encourage students from qualifying universities to apply. Between November 2008 and May 2009, the Consular section conducted numerous meetings with student groups, university administrators, and private travel agencies and other recruiters. Post canvassed the entire country, from Bihać in the extreme northwest, to Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Sarajevo. Post also shared information with our Embassy in neighboring Serbia for agencies that often recruit within BiH.

¶4. Our efforts resulted in a 2009 refusal rate of only 8 percent of SWT applicants. More significantly, the total number of students participating in the program nearly tripled from the previous year. The number of issuances increased despite a 25 percent drop in overall SWT applicants. The dramatic increase in issuances is especially good news, as Post believes that the SWT program has the potential to be a very positive influence on Bosnian youth. Post hopes that with renewed outreach efforts in the coming year, that we can continue this upward trend. Additionally, the BiH government has established an agency to address the accreditation issue. A future cable will discuss new developments that may precipitate a new SWT policy in BiH and an expansion of overall eligible participants.

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